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BREAKTHROUGH

By Susan Palmer

JESSAMYN MASON AND I SANG A DUET FOR SACRAMENT meeting on Easter Sunday, and we sucked. I don't mean false modesty, hoping you'll come back to me with, "Oh, no, Nina, you guys were really good." I mean we butchered "More Holiness Give Me" in all the ways you can butcher a song without perforating eardrums. What is truly sad about this is I did everything I knew not to reduce that song to blood and bones, but it happened anyway. I'm sure Jessamyn tried as hard as she could, too, and Jessamyn is such a freaky little perfectionist that I don't have to give her the benefit of the doubt on this.

I hate Jessamyn Mason.

I didn't start out hating her. Heck, I hardly knew the woman before we got this singing gig together. She was out there on the fringe of my world, getting up now and then in testimony meeting with these lilting stories of profound revelation. Cool, I always thought when she was done. Cool. God's chatting up somebody down here.

Then a month before Easter Sunday, I get asked to sing by the ward music person, and I'm all happy because singing is who I am. It's what I do. Well, mothering a four-year-old and six-year-old and a thirty-two-year-old is what I actually do. But in my heart, I'm mostly singing. When I get alone time, once every other week or so, I sit down with my guitar, a sweet beauty of a Gibson that my grandpa gave me after arthritis finally twisted his fingers up so bad he couldn't hold a chord any more. I strum and sing and think back on my college days and the folk-music crowd I hung out with, how we'd play here and there around campus, at parties, for friends' weddings, and that one time on public radio when everybody loved us and said we were good.

But my life got out in front of my singing somehow, and now music runs along the edge of my world. So, anyhow, I got asked to do a song on Easter Sunday, and then the music person says, "Do you think Jessamyn Mason could do a duet with you? She really wants to sing but can't work the choir into her schedule. She's so busy with teaching."

And me, idiot that I am, I just said, "Yeah, no problem. It'll

be fun." I call up Jessamyn and invite myself over. I head to her house with my song books one afternoon when she's home grading papers and Nate and Frankie are at their grandpa's, and she turns out to be a complete and utter pain before I have even halfway got my coat off.

"We can't do 'He Is Risen,'" she said. "It's lost its meaning from being overperformed." And then, "I hope you brought a capo for your guitar. I rarely find guitarists who can sing in my range. You people tend to have lower voices."

Now I am a people-pleaser, just want everyone to get along and be happy. I'd rather jump off a building than start a fight, but right away, I'm having bad thoughts. I call them my evil twin thoughts. But I smiled at her and said, "Yes on the capo. No problem. We'll sing in whatever key you like. One thing about me. I'm flexible."

"Good," she said and took the music from me. She opened the hymn book to "More Holiness" and said, "We'll do this. Juxtaposing it with Easter will add resonance." She put the book on the music stand in her, by now I notice, perfect living room. If this living room were mine, it would be destroyed in about fifteen minutes. Things that look good in stores enter my home and become instantly shabby. It's not the boys' fault. It's more like a family project. Life is messy at our house. But Jessamyn's perfect teen-age daughters did not seem to be interfering in any noticeable way with the house-beautiful motif. Not me, though. Before our practice session was over, I'd almost knocked a glass lamp off an end table. Jessamyn held her breath, grimaced at me, and said, "Go stand over there. It will be less problematic for the room."

So that's how we got in the habit of her ordering me around, and me going "Yes, OK, whatever works for you."

We had two more rehearsals before I realized that no matter how hard we tried, she and I were one big musical bomb waiting to go off. And you know what? I didn't abort the mission. This was Jack's advice, tangled up with the boys on the living room floor playing storm the beach and steal the Power Ranger. They're crawling around and ambushing each other and laughing hysterically while I'm sitting on the couch doing a major rant against Jessamyn. I should have followed Jack's advice, delivered between shrieks as the boys pummeled him: "Abort the mission, Bravo one four! Abort! Abort!" I should have gone to the ward music person and said, "This will be your worst nightmare. Pick someone else. Have us arrested. Get us out of town, but don't let us stand up in front of the



SUSAN PALMER is a reporter working at the Register-Guard in Eugene, Oregon. Her novel *The Tabernacle Bar* (Signature Books) was nominated for a Pacific Northwest Booksellers Award. She may be contacted at <suopalmer@qwest.net>.

congregation, whatever you do." I didn't because I thought it was my evil twin talking.

I was about thirty years old before I learned that everybody has an evil twin inside them. All that time I thought it was my special private hell, having this contrarian babbling like Satan himself in my brain. And what's worse, making me laugh, making me care more about stuff like music and my garden and the way morning sunlight slants across the kitchen than I do about reading scriptures and getting the dishes done. Then I started seeing this therapist so I could keep from running out on my kids and my wonderful though somewhat extremely slothful husband, and I told her about the evil twin who kept spewing romantic garbage in my head about flying off to Provence and singing sad folk songs at the country cafes and no responsibilities. And the therapist patted my knee and said, "Honey, we've all got one. Get used to it."

So, I've been getting used to it. The therapist said the job of becoming sane in an insane world is to use every self at your disposal. Since we all have an evil twin, the evil twin must have value, she said. "Figure out its contribution to your soul, and you won't need me anymore," she said.

The next week, when I saw her I said, "I've figured it out. The evil twin is my burden. If I can keep from doing what it says, I will have proved my worth."

"Wrong answer," she said. "Try again."

Her wrong-answer pronouncements made me mad. When I talked this over with Lily down the street, Lily said she sounded like a malpracticing therapist.

"They're not supposed to judge you," Lily said. "They're supposed to help you get in touch with your feelings. They're supposed to help you explore your childhood wounds. In therapy, there aren't supposed to be wrong answers."

I don't know. Maybe my special gift is to always pick the loser. But I couldn't see finding a new therapist, even if mine wasn't all that good. She got me thinking about stuff, and she kept me from tossing the kids out a window during their daily pre-bedtime hysteria. She kept me from flinging a hammer at

the TV during football season. Not literally. But you know what I mean.

I thought it was my evil twin telling me to ditch perfect Jessamyn Mason, and I decided, no, I will hang in there. We are doing something of worth, and I will, by the pure force of my better nature, work it out. Every day, after breakfast was done and the boys were safely slaying dragons or some such, I would get out my guitar and practice. Pretty soon I had that song down so that I could do it in my sleep. And once a week, I would dutifully trudge up the front steps to Jessamyn Mason's spotless home, and we would practice together. She had a lilting, pretty soprano voice. I give her that. And I've been told my alto is warm and full. So our voices sounded fine together.

But even as we got more proficient with the song, each practice was worse than the one before it. Jessamyn drove me nuts. Each week, she'd name a new thing that was "purely unacceptable." They were things I'd always done as a performer, slow the tempo of the song here or there, drop the chords out for an a cappella bar or two, look at my singing partner. Jessamyn considered them all grave musical sins.

"What do you mean, I can't look at you?" I said when this faux pas was added to the list. "I always look at who I'm singing with."

"If you look at me, I'll lose my place in the music," she said. "I'm used to choral performing where we look straight ahead, not at each other."

So, I'm telling Lily about this later. "Can you believe it? I can't even frick'n' look at her? She is off the charts." And Lily just

laughed and shook her head and wanted to know how things were going in the Jack department. Lily's mission is to see me and Jack sealed in the temple. She's always giving me these pep talks or booklets that will get Jack coming to church again. I've stopped explaining that Jack is way too wily for any of this. Jack manages construction sites, and you can't run any sort of a line on him. Just makes him laugh.

The therapist didn't laugh when I told her about Jessamyn Mason. In fact, she became grave and she said, "Love's a gift, not a sacrifice, Nina." And I didn't know how to take that, be-



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cause of course, anybody who knows anything knows that love certainly is a sacrifice. Or what are we all doing on Easter Sunday? I chalked it up to her lack of Christian education and kept on practicing.

If you try hard enough, you can make anything work. That's what I believe. But all the while, I'm undermining the gig with Jessamyn-loathing. It started getting on Jack's nerves. "Why don't you just tell her where to get off?" he said. "She's got no call to lord it over you like that. You've got a wonderful voice. She oughta kiss your feet, you letting her sing with you." And that's why I love Jack—football slave, human wrecking machine, and slothmeister that he is. Because Jack would flat-out back me against the world, even if the world were in the right. And also, because Jack gives foot rubs that'll make you forget your name.

"I can make this work," I said. "I know I can. It's not as if she's a bad person. She's a good person. She loves the Lord, and she tries her best. If we both try our best, it'll all work out."

But when Easter Sunday rolled around and I tumbled out of bed extra early so I could have some quiet time with just me and my Heavenly Father, a bad feeling came over me. I went and knelt in my private little place downstairs beside the washer and dryer where I can get all the noise in my head to shut up. I'm praying fervently: Let this be good. Let me and Jessamyn be a conduit for love, no matter how much of a whiner I have been all month. Let me put it all behind me and just focus on music. All the while, the bad feeling is sitting there behind my closed eyeballs. Even as I pray, I know it in my heart.

"When you say 'suck,'" the therapist said to me, "What exactly does that mean?"

"It means that I found new ways to wreck the music," I told her. "I've botched little moments in performances before, played a wrong chord, forgotten a lyric, bungled the rhythm. I did all those things, and then I lost the melody for two entire bars. Just lost it. I'm wandering all over the map trying to find it again, and I look at Jessamyn, and she just freaks. . ." I laughed then, at last, until the tears streamed down my cheeks. "The look on her face was priceless. Worst moment of her previously perfect life."

"How did your evil twin feel?" the therapist asked.

"Oh, wistful. I don't know. Amused, maybe," I said.

"What do you think about that?" she said.

"I guess it means that I've got one of those passive-aggressive personalities," I said. "I'm pretending to be all sweet and cooperative, but another part of me wants to blow the place up."

"Wrong answer. Don't do me that psychobabble," she said.

"What do you want from me?"

"Your money," she said. "What do you want from you?"

And right then I teared up and grabbed the arms of the chair, hanging on for dear life while something pulled loose inside me.

"What you want," she said as she handed me the tissue box. "It's OK to know what it is. It's OK to get a look at it. I guarantee you."

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I think we went a month like that, me rocking and crying, her with the tissues, before I got it out of my mouth in a spasm so big and sad I go red to the ears just thinking about it. "I want God to answer one of my prayers," this said in the voice of a kid who didn't get invited to the birthday party.

"Ahhhh," she said. "I see. And how would you know if God answered one of your prayers?"

Now, I hadn't really given that a thought before. How would I know? The question kind of stopped me. My brain went all empty, and we didn't make any more progress that day. Then something in me started feeling like therapy was a stupid waste of time, and I canceled three appointments in a row and didn't answer the messages the therapist left me. Jack got mad, said I'd dang well better call her back or he'd do it for me.

"I don't care if we have to pay that over-educated broad out of the kids' college fund. She got your smile back on your face, and then you went and lost it when you sang in church," he said.

"You'll have to drag me back there, then. She's a loser. Lily said so." My advice: Never marry a man who's bigger than you.

"Where were we?" said the therapist.

"Evil twin, bad music, etc.," I said.

"Oh, right," she said. "So how would you know if God answered your prayers?"

"You would just know," I said.

"What does that mean?" she said.

"Everybody else knows. I don't know how they know it. God gives them what they ask for or tells them what to do or something."

So then I got this long lecture about who's in the room paying big bucks for therapy: Just me. Not everybody else from the congregation. Not perfect Jessamyn Mason or the bishop or anybody. I think I was making her mad because she was pacing, like she was trapped. But then she threw herself into her big comfy chair and looked at me and said, "What's the best thing that happened when you sang that song in church?"

"Nothing good happened. Just some old blue-hairs with hearing aids said we were good. But you could torture cats up there, and they wouldn't know the difference," I said.

"OK," she said. "If your evil twin were telling me the best thing that happened after you sang that song in church, what would she say?"

